

## Facebook, Fake News, and the Ethics of Censorship

- **Pizzagate.** A theory incubated on Reddit during the leadup to the 2016 Presidential election held that Hillary Clinton was a member of a “secret society of pedophiles operating through a pizza place loosely connected to Clinton associated David Brock.” (November 4, 2016). The theories were based on the leaked emails of John Podesta, Clinton’s former campaign manager, which were said to include numerous coded references to child pornography and child trafficking. The conspiracy was said to be based out of the basement of a Washington D.C. pizzeria called Comet Ping Pong, run by James Alefantis, a well-connected Clinton supporter.
- **Irish Slaves in the US.** Claim made by various articles circulated on Facebook: “Early in America’s history, white Irish slaves outnumbered black slaves and endured worse treatment at the hands of their masters.” (2008-present)  
What’s true: “Like impoverished people of other nationalities, many emigrated from Ireland to the Americas in the 17th and 18th centuries as indentured servants; a smaller number were forcibly banished into indentured servitude during the period of the English Civil Wars; indentured servants often lived and worked under harsh conditions and were sometimes treated cruelly.”  
What’s false: “Unlike institutionalized chattel slavery, indentured servitude was neither hereditary nor lifelong; unlike black slaves, white indentured servants had legal rights; unlike black slaves, indentured servants weren’t considered property.”
- **Vaccinated Twins.** Health Nut News: “Infant Twins Die Simultaneously After Vaccines, Medical Board Rules ‘Just a Coincidence’” (February 2017)  
Claim: “The simultaneous death of infant twins in Turkey in 2002 was connected to their having recently received vaccinations.” What’s true: “In June 2002, twin infants in Turkey passed away within 24 hours of each other two days after receiving vaccinations.” What’s false: “The infants were diagnosed as having died of SIDS, and reports framing this event as evidence of the harm caused by vaccinations do so by misleadingly omitting any mention of contrary evidence.”
- **Spring Break Chant.** The Yucatan times reported on a claim tweeted by Peruvian tourist on a cruise off the coast of Cancun, Mexico: “A flock of Americans (it’s not clear whether they were drunk or in ‘full’ use of their faculties) started to sing the vomitous chant ‘build the wall’.”  
The story was widely circulated, including by major outlets such as Fox news and the Huffington post.  
The Guardian sent a reporter to investigate the claim, but he was unable to find any supporting evidence that the event occurred. The tourist, Anaximandro Burga, did not respond to requests for comment.

- **People Magazine Quote.** Attributed to then-candidate Donald Trump by a Facebook meme: “If I were to run, I’d run as a Republican. They’re the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they’d still eat it up. I bet my numbers would be terrific” (supposedly from a 1998 People Magazine interview) (October 2015)  
No such quote appeared in People Magazine, nor is there any evidence that President Trump ever said it.
- **Global Cooling.** Louder With Crowder: “The latest talking point to march to its death? Fossil fuels cause global warming. Because they don’t. In fact, NASA says they’re actually causing temporary global cooling.” (December 2015).  
The claim was actually made, not by NASA, but by the “science and paranormal correspondent” for U.K. tabloid Express, Jon Austin.  
Austin previously claimed that moon is hollow, and serves as a base for aliens.

## Mill on censorship

*The harm principle:* Mill argues that the following principle should govern all proposed attempts to interfere with the activities of others:

- “The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others” (On Liberty, ch. 1).

*Mill on censorship:* Mill takes a very strong stance on when censorship is morally permissible:

- “If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind” (On Liberty, ch. 2).

*Classical liberalism:* Mill’s views about the appropriate scope of individual liberty are associated with a political philosophy called “classical liberalism.”

Classical liberals believe in very limited government and very limited interference with how individuals choose to live their lives. According to classical liberals, we should only use coercion to solve social problems if we can demonstrate that purely voluntary solutions cannot work.

## Is fake news harmful?

An argument that fake news interferes with good governance:

1. If voters base their policy and candidate preferences on misinformation (false or highly misleading information), then they are less likely to favor good policies and candidates—policies that are beneficial, fair, and just, and candidates that are likely to implement such policies.

2. If voters favor worse policies and candidates, the government will be less likely to implement good policies.
3. The viral spread of fake news causes voters to base their policy and candidate preferences on misinformation.
4. The viral spread of fake news makes it less likely that the government will implement good policies.

## Mill's arguments against censorship

Mill thinks that we should only interfere with others' speech (written or otherwise) if it is likely to harm others. What should we do, then, if we think that a particular opinion is (a) false, (b) poorly supported, and (c) likely to cause harm? Should we intervene to prevent the opinion from being shared?

You might expect Mill's answer here to be a clear "yes." But instead he argues that we should only censor an opinion if it is likely to lead to a specific kind of harm—immediate physical harm. So the answer to "should we censor this false, harmful opinion" is almost always "no."

Argument 1: the argument for false orthodoxy.

- Censorship entrenches orthodox opinions that are actually false.
- Censors can make mistakes even when they are justifiably confident that a view is false.
- History teaches us that much of what we firmly believe today is likely to be disproved in the future.
- If we censor views we think are almost certainly false, then we will make it less likely that false orthodox views will be corrected by silencing people who challenge them.

Argument 2: the argument from partially true falsehoods.

- Censorship prevents us from benefiting from the truth in opinions that are only partially false.
- If we censor opinions we think are false, some of the views we will censor will be only partly false. Some of those views will include important elements of truth that could help us make our overall picture of the world more accurate.

Argument 3: the argument from the value of being challenged.

- Censorship prevents us from the benefits of having our true beliefs challenged.
- Encountering beliefs that we disagree with is important even when we happen to be right. Why? Because examining why people disagree with us, and defending our true beliefs against the best arguments that can be marshalled, helps us to better understand why our true beliefs are true.
- When we understand why something is true, our belief in it is more secure, and less likely to give way in the face of misleading evidence that it is false.

- Better understanding why our beliefs are true will also make our true beliefs more useful to us, since our understanding of the relevant issues will be more nuanced and so more useful in guiding behavior.

Argument 4: the argument from the motives of censors.

- Censors are not only fallible, they can also be driven by goals other than truth.
- Specifically, they might be politically motivated, or driven by greed, or under the influence of an oppressive or corrupt political regime.